all that dirt
aborigines 1938
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ALL THAT DIRT

19 Neville, Coloured minority.
20 Chief secretary's department files, 2988/1921.
21 Chief secretary's department files, 1003/1923.
22 Interview with Mrs Alma Garlett at Tammin, 1980.
23 Aborigines department files, 213/1927.
25 Ibid.
26 West Australian, 3 Aug 1938.
27 Neville, Coloured minority.
29 Aborigines department files, 261/1927.
30 Neville stated in the 1931 Annual report that of 83 girls sent out to work from Moore river, 30 had been returned pregnant, 22 of them to white men.
31 Aborigines department Annual report, 1936.
32 Chief secretary's department files, 543/1921.
33 Interviews with Mrs Farrell at Brunswick Junction in 1980 and 1981. This edited transcript of the interviews is reproduced here with her permission.
34 Aboriginal healer.
35 Sister Kate's Children's Cottage Home was opened in Perth in 1933 to care for 'quarter-caste' children. It was subsidised by the Aborigines department and the lotteries commission.
36 Aborigines department, Annual Report, 1919.
37 Howard, 'Migration', 305.
38 Interview with Mr Charles Sandstone at Wyalkatchem, 1979.
39 Howard, 'Migration', 304.
40 Ibid, 306.

6 Before grog, before wages, before the Japanese war: The Northern Territory in 1938 and some station routines
Ann McGrath

The majority of people living in the Northern Territory in 1938 were Aboriginal, outnumbering others by more than two to one. Most Aborigines lived in rural areas, so the disproportion there was striking. Women were the minority of all sectors of the population. The annual report of the administration for 1937-8 gave a 'total' population of 6,704, which included the substantial Asiatic numbers but excluded Aborigines. It was the highest non-Aboriginal population recorded since the territory had been taken over by the commonwealth, and it was to increase by a further 701 people the following year. There were over twice as many white men as women in the territory in the year 1938: about 3825 to 1820, and over half of the women lived in 'rural' areas. [1] The administration was pleased to report a decrease in the 'half-caste' or part-Aboriginal and Asiatic population, despite the fact that this must have been mostly due to deaths.

Aborigines of full descent were decreasing to such an extent that most people in 1938 firmly believed they would die out in the not-too-distant future. In 1937 there were estimated to be 17,315 Aborigines and 'half-castes' in the Northern Territory. Of these 9,906 were self supporting in their 'native state', 2,560 were maintained by missions and the government, 3,449 were employed, and 1,800 were dependents of employees maintained by stations. [2] The census of 1938 reported a total of 15,281, and by 1942 the population had declined by another 2,000. The 1938 figures contain different categories which were unfortunately not defined, and the wide disparities were more probably the result of guesswork involved in the estimates rather than evidence of any dramatic redistribution. The 1938 census appears the most accurate: 7,000 were listed as 'nomadic', 1,811 men and 861 women in 'supervised camps' and 898 in other employment. Many employers would have underestimated numbers in employment because of the financial liabilities, such as the medical benefit fund, licence fees and maintenance of dependents usually entailed. The figures indubitably show the striking disproportion of men to women: three men to two women amongst Aborigines of full descent and about four to three women when part-Aboriginals were also included. [3]

The stated policy of the chief protector of Aborigines, Dr Cecil Cook, was 'to outbreed colour altogether' by encouraging marriages between white men and part-Aboriginal women, and in regard to
'full-bloods':
The ultimate objective of the policy was the conversion of the de-tribalized aboriginal in town districts from a social inebrius to a civil unit of economic value, and in country districts from an unproductive nomad to a self-supporting peasant.

'He' should be 'reared and educated' so as to engage in 'profitable occupations ... not in conflict with the white population' so 'he' would be 'self-supporting' and thus 'increase the wealth of the Territory'. [4] Consequently the government was extremely sensitive to upsetting the pastoralists, who controlled one of the few consistently viable industries, which also maintained thousands of Aborigines.

The territory was still being mocked as a 'White Elephant', because it did little but soak up federal funds. In 1937, W.L. Payne, chairman of the Land Administration Board in Queensland, and J.W. Fletcher, a successful pastoralist, were engaged to investigate land and land industries in the Northern Territory. Their report concluded that the territory could support a European population of 40,000 [5] and the minister for the interior, J. McEwen, who conducted a follow-up visit, left with a similarly optimistic view.

The Payne-Fletcher report was critical of the current organisation of Aboriginal affairs under a chief protector who was also chief health officer in charge of medical services. Two and a half pages of the lengthy report were devoted to 'The Aboriginal Problem' and the same to the 'White Australia policy'. It recommended that the interests of the commercial sector be put even more clearly before the interests of Aborigines, especially criticizing the resumption of commercial land for Aboriginal reserves and the prevention of pearl-fishers from sailing at Arnhem Land locations. The report claimed that the best workers had been:

trained on stations and they had not been subjected to other influences. Amongst them were some really skilful workers, apparently delighting in their work and the conditions under which they lived. [6]

Women were viewed only as potential domestics, despite the wide variety of tasks they performed around the town. The government was criticized for its lack of effort to train Aboriginal women except for use in the compound.

The 'White Australia policy' was a national desire publicly regarded as 'sacrosanct'. The report recognized that:

All the States, all political parties, and all sections of the people are united in an ardent desire to maintain racial purity. Cheap or coloured labour cannot be allowed to become permanently established in Australia. There can be no compromise on this fundamental principle. Australia is prepared to stand or fall by its great ideal. [7]

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In contemporary minds, the 'White Australia policy' was also extended to Aborigines; that is one of the reasons they were considered a problem, whereas the breeding of more colour through 'miscegenation' or Aborigines mating with whites was considered an abhorrence. It had been made illegal in the Northern Territory. The Payne-Fletcher report saw the solution in providing imported indentured labour - 'eastern natives' - reasoning that 'paradoxical as it may seem [this] would help strengthen the White Australia policy by guarding the health of females on whom the success of that policy depends'. [8] Indulging in sex with Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal women was a major problem of territory men from all ranks, including the policemen who were currently appointed as 'Protectors of Aborigines'. The 'eastern natives' might have allowed bourgeois women more leisure time and inducement to remain in the territory, and would simultaneously remove Aboriginal women further from the possibility of tempting white husbands.

The missionaries seemed to be losing ground in favour of the anthropologists and their segregation policies, for in 1937 the anthropologist Dr Donald Thomson had been invited to write up his Arnhem Land investigations; these were tabled in the commonwealth parliament in June 1938. He proposed a complete revision of native policy, with legislation along the lines of the Mandated Territory of New Guinea for the protection of natives. He recommended the complete segregation of the 'remnant of native tribes ... not yet disorganized or detribalized by prolonged contact with alien culture' so as to 'preserve intact' their 'culture in its entirety'. Thomson argued that Arnhem Land should become an 'inviolable' reserve, and that other reserves be created. [9] Part-Aborigines and other 'leftovers' not fitting into the museum piece or 'noble savage' category could amuse the missionaries. McEwen, under pressure to appease southern and international concern, was forced to agree with many of Thomson's recommendations. The position of Dr Cook as chief health officer and chief protector of Aborigines was consequently abolished, and a Native Affairs Branch established. E.W.P. Chinnery, a man with extensive experience in the Mandated Territory, was appointed to the position of director of native affairs and arrived to take up his position in the territory in April 1939.

Throughout the 1930s, humanitarians, unionists, missionaries and anthropologists had agitated for reforms in Aboriginal affairs. Public awareness was aroused by these groups with the aid of their mouthpieces such as the Aborigines' Protector, the Bulletin of the Aboriginal Friends' Association, and local and southern newspapers, which amplified the cases later described by Bowley as 'spectacular injustices'. [10] There were calls from all of these groups for some form of organised inspection and control of the conditions of Aborigines employed in the pastoral industry.

The North Australian Workers' Union exposed cases of exploitation of Aborigines on stations in the late 1920s and intermittently throughout the 1930s. Because Aborigines were paid in rations and allocated only a few items of clothing and other necessities, the unionists classed their work as 'slave labour'. They argued that such
cheap labour was lowering living standards and closing off jobs to whites, many of whom by 1938 had been unemployed for long periods. Labelled 'red rags' by some pastoralists, they agitated for equal wages for Aborigines and occasionally 'stirred up' the Station Aboriginals. One union official, A. Antony, wrote in August 1938 to the labour paper, the Northern Standard, condemning the amount of white unemployment in contrast to the prosperity of black labour in the pastoral industry, which he claimed represented over two-thirds of men employed therein. He proposed that the domestic 'Aboriginal slaves' of 'other classes' should be paid award wages and 'southern girls' could fill the vacancies. Antony favoured complete segregation of Aborigines to create employment for whites. [11] Earlier a 1927-8 boycott of hotels employing Aborigines had been thwarted because unionists would not give up their own 'black help', arguing that this was for the sake of the white women. [12] The government was less than ready, however, to take over the maintenance of Aborigines from the pastoralists.

Matt Thomas was another unionist who had campaigned on such issues as the exploitation of Aboriginal women on road work in the Wave Hill and Victoria River Downs districts. In early 1938 he called for improved health care for station Aborigines, and he wrote in the southern and local press on the topic of white unemployment and the Aboriginal cause, claiming that he was unable to obtain work because of his activist stance. In August it was reported that he was accidentally killed when he jumped from a road about 11.40 pm, with his hand signalling for a car to stop. [13]

Aborigines were frequently in the news in 1938; newsworthy events included Constable Murray's notorious venture into Arnhem Land to 'arrest' Aborigines responsible for 'wholesale killings', and a few Darwin incidents of a sexual nature. In February, Elijah, a lay preacher from Goulburn Island mission was sentenced to six months' gaol and the magistrate recommended that 'some action' be taken by the surgeon 'to restrain his sexual abnormality'. He was allegedly in the habit of exposing his genitalia and ogling white women. Once he apparently lay across the footpath of Mrs Nabel Lillian Weeden, asked her if she wanted him, then started preaching from the Bible. Neither of the two offended women could identify him, but Elijah was charged on the grounds that an acquisitive meant encouragement to other Aborigines and the crown solicitor feared public indignation. [14] In August another mission man, Packadalle, assaulted two Darwin women in their homes, and attempted to rape one of them. While locals wanted to 'lynch' the culprit the anthropologist A.P. Elkin was quick to warn against 'race hysteria', recommending an educational policy to counter the 'evil effects' of detribalisation. [15]

For the government and pastoralists, the incidents confirmed their contention that employment was the healthiest thing for Aborigines; anthropologists saw confirmation of their proposed solution of segregation. For the Darwin Aborigines, it meant more curtailment of their movements: stockfarming was rigorously enforced, and they were not to travel anywhere in the town area except to their place of employment and back to the compound, which in 1938 was moved from Kahlin Beach to the then more isolated location of Bagot. They were prevented from acting as messengers and having access of white people's houses. [16]

Xavier Herbert's Capricornia was published in 1938 by the Publicist, the patriotic press run by well-known critic P.R. or 'Inky' Stephenson. [17] It vividly portrays the harsh realities of a society torn by racial and class tensions, and is especially scathing of current Aboriginal policy and practice. The book received instant recognition and acclaim because it was backed by the controversial but influential Stephenson, the more so when it won the Sydney Sesquicentenary Award of 250 pounds for the Commonwealth prize novel, although Stephenson commented bitterly that the prize for the author who caught the biggest fish was 300 pounds, confirming his belief that Australia was a 'literary boghole'. Xavier Herbert delights in the irony that the judge's decision which launched him into his successful career was based, he says, on the book's ability to embarrass the Federal Government rather than on its literary merit. The Northern Standard published several reviews, and it was an extremely popular topic of discussion amongst territory men, though not considered suitable for cocktail parties. One correspondent under the nom-de-plume of Crown Colonist, apparently a member of the government, condemned Capricornia for 'filthy language' but made no direct comment on its content which was painfully close to home. A.C. Weeden, the husband of one of the women who gave evidence against Elijah, got into a diatribe with Herbert who had the gall to read aloud the publication of his rather libellous book. A heated debate ensued for and against 'the usefulness and uselessness of the black man'. Weeden complained that on the corner of Cavenagh and Knopkey Streets - two of Darwin's main streets - 'the champion of the niggers finished up by losing his head and shouting, "Oh go to ------ you ------- white ---------". And that from the author of the book we are supposed to waste time reading'. [18]

THE PASTORAL INDUSTRY

A culmination of efforts and events had made 1938 particularly volatile for Aboriginal affairs in the territory. It is a moot point whether this public interest was held significant by station Aborigines; they were not invited to submit their views on what sort of future they wanted for themselves, let alone regarding the future of the territory as a whole.

Aborigines were the main labour force on territory cattle stations before the second world war - and they are still important, though to a lesser extent, in the 1980s. Aborigines were engaged in all the diverse occupations necessary to the functioning of a pastoral enterprise. Men were employed in stockwork, fencing, road and building work, maintaining transport facilities such as horses, wagons, trucks and cars. The Aboriginal women performed a variety of tasks, including: cooking; fanning and stocking; butchering; butchering; preparing hides, milking cows, gardening and domestic service. With the exception of a few stations near the Queensland border, and those
which distributed occasional 'pocket money', only drovers and 'half-coate apprentices' generally received a few shillings in wages: other employees were fed and clothed in return for their labours, and on most stations, a certain number of their close relations were also provided with weekly rations.

The term 'houseworker' took on a broad meaning on the vast cattle stations in terms of spheres of duty and space in which work was carried out. It was used to denote any person whose work was orientated towards the needs of the station family or the domestic needs of other employees, white or black. This could include herding the goats, drawing water from sometimes distant supplies and carrying it over wide distances, hunting food when station supplies ran low, or cooking, cleaning, pulling the punkah fan, in fact anything which was not related to stockwork or tasks outside the boundary of the main camp.

**DAILY ROUTINE OF 'HOUSEWORKERS'**

The flavour of everyday life is probably best expressed by novelists, Mary and Elizabeth Durack's youthful product, All-about, published in 1935 by the Bulletin, begins:

The dozen little humpies of grass and bark and rusty tin are weird and unreal in the starlight, with their backdrop of pandanus palms and tattered paper barks. From the precipices of the homestead comes the first, long-drawn crow of a rooster, and from the depths of the nearest humpy a low, disgruntled muttering. 'Too-much me all day get up early fellas. Why can't another gin get up light's fire sometime?'

It is Nubbleah's early-morning groll, as she rolls out of her dusty blanket, oraws over her piccaninny and her snoring spouse, through the low doorway of her mit. The faded dress that has been drying overnight on the limb of a cooibah is slipped over her somewhat massive nakedness. She wets her hands in half a pannikin of water, rubs them over her face and dries both face and hands on the hem of her garment. Then she pours the remainder of the water over her tousled tresses and makes some pretence of disentangling them with a practically toothless old comb she has picked up out of the dust. That is all. Her morning toilet completed, Nubbleah slouches up, still grumbling, towards the house. [19]

All-about was set on Argyle station in north Western Australia, near the Northern Territory border and was run by Connor, Doebert and Durack, also the lessees of adjoining Newry and nearby Ivanhoe Stations.

Blam Barney, or Flying Fox, an Aboriginal woman who now lives in Kununurra, worked at Newry Station in the 1930s when Mrs Irene Fuller was 'the missus'. She was a female boss. When she and her sister Laddie were teenagers to tell me about their father 'Old Man Charlie' - a

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**BEFORE GROG, BEFORE WAGES, BEFORE THE JAPANESE WAR**

Mailman between outback stations—they also provided a most worthwhile summary of their daily routine as 'houseworkers'. The pattern at Newry was much the same as at Willeroo, Tillerary and Ivanhoe stations. The women would get up early in the morning, before sunrise, light the kitchen fire for the gogia (whitman or woman), while another set the table. Then they returned to the blacks' camp, prepared their own breakfast and sat down to eat. Work would begin early, preparing the whites' 'smoko', followed by another 'sit down', and then the washing up. Dinner was then cooked for whites and employees; the women left it ready, and their dinner would be eaten in the ' Blacks' Kitchen' after the others were finished. Thick slices of home-made bread or large slabs of freshly killed beef, curry or stew might be served. After this they returned to their camp, and washed their own clothes. Then, in Blam's words,

'...Mrs would ring a bell in house. We go back work again. Watering garden, wash 'em plates, cook 'em tucker for supper, ready feller. Make up dinner, stove, early feller tucker ... beef. Leave 'em long freezer, cool 'em, beef we leave 'em longs stove ... we sit down wait for supper. We go back make 'em supper for gogia ... Cut bread ... Night-time go back, wash 'em plates. [20]

Winnie Chapman describes her daily routine at Ivanhoe: at sunrise, she got up and milked the goats with Bot, her work companion, and prepared the milk. She carted water from the bore in 'sticks' to clean the kitchen. She oorned the beef, out the bread and meat to serve for the employees' lunch; when the bell was rung, everyone came for lunch. Tea was poured into individual billy cans—made of used tins and wire—and taken back to the blacks' camp. When lunch break was over, they'd walk back to the homestead.

Four girls worked in the kitchen, and four in the manager's house, two wiping and two washing up. When finished, they carried water in tins with the aid of a yoke, then had a rest. This was followed by 'play around in billabong, big lagoon, gather some yams after lunch, After that water the garden, collect the eggs'. Afterwards, the kitchen was cleaned up again, the sound of the bell beckoning them to the homestead. Then the 'girls' worked with the goats, collected rubbish and did other jobs when the housework was finished. Supper was prepared, after which the women returned to the kitchen to wash the dishes; 'Carry away water, sweep floor, kitchen. Go home then'. [21] Corroborees often followed, or a feast such as 'rib-bones of the killer, cooked in ashes, bullock's head wrapped in paper, put in a hope in the ground and roasted slowly from above ... [then] singing in the firelit circle ...' [22]

Relating her working days at Kingbing, Daisy Djundun, a Gadjerong woman, said she stayed 'at the house' working. A black woman who was in charge gave them instructions:

'Eight you feller go out killen nanny goat, bin all about girl go out getten nanny goat'-Got a rope, bring 'em up longs meathouse. Cut 'em, hang 'em up, skin 'em up, salt...
ALL THAT DIRT

'em, put 'em longa meathouse, taken somemeller, roast 'em longa stove. Only we girl's that's all, no man, that's all we bin only taught.

After this work was complete, they had a lunchbreak, where they went hunting goanna and searching for wild honey. Then they returned to the house and had a rest before they started work again, cleaning the house, filling up a dray with firewood. [23]

The Aboriginal women's account depicts a long and fairly arduous day, in which they were required to perform many and varied duties. The day went by according to a disciplined and fixed routine. Not surprisingly, the evidence left by most white women does not suggest such a long and varied work output. Details such as the use of a bell to beckon workers, the post-lunch siesta, and the strict routine of work, however, are corroborated by white evidence. Helen Skardon mentioned the evening washing up, and the ritual of saying goodnight to her when all the work had been completed; 'Finished now, Missus. Goodnight Missus' the women would say one by one. She elaborated on the hygiene rituals imposed upon them:

Every morning they had to wash, change their dresses, and comb their hair in the wash-house before starting work. Before lunch the dresses were changed again for the dirty ones, and as they were always filthy after the morning's work, were washed before they went away to play in the afternoons. [24]

The long midday break or siesta was normally part of station routine. This was sensible because little work could be done during the hot hours of the day, but it did make each working day longer. Henrietta Pearce wrote of an almost identical routine for her female employees; she mentioned the early rising to prepare the wood stove, and elucidated a similar pattern of varied activities during the day. [25] The black women's entire day seemingly revolved around catering for the white family's needs, values and lifestyle. Station routine was remarkably similar from one property to another.

There was also a weekly routine or schedule, with specific washing days and baking days. Domestics were usually permitted a Sunday excursion or 'walkabout', where they collected bush foods as a change from the monotony of the station diet. When the men returned after lengthy stays in stockcamps, a holiday was sometimes permitted. On most stations, the women went on an annual long holiday with the men and children. Several stations, however, did not allow the domesticity such a holiday. Djuundjul described a holiday she once had with Mrs Weaver and her children, but this was more in the capacity of a servant and babysitter. She was not usually permitted to go on a long holiday, for she had to look after the homestead when Mrs Weaver was on the road or annual wet season break. [26] Sullivan never had a long 'walkabout' from Tipperary, nor did Moore from Dunham River. [27] Key workers were considered indispensable by the employers, and many - especially part-Aborigines - were discouraged from mingling with the other Aborigines altogether. At Neawy, the women were allowed to go on extended 'walkabouts' on a rotational basis, one group being allowed to go at intervals so there would always be some domestic workers available while others had a break.

The 'kitchen girls' could make light of the frequently monotonous chores by singing, chatting or joking while they worked. This is described in All-about:

On the back verandah Morah is washing up. Never was anyone, off the film, capable of putting much coquetry into a menial task. She strikes attitudes with a plate and a sea-towel in her hand, aways gracefully to gather up another dripping article, [all] the while her eyes are doing wondrous revolutions in her particularly homely young face.

Arygulla of the petite form, doe-like eyes and little bat-like nose is bringing her duster back and forth over the dining room linoleum, to the tune of the corroboree she is humming softly to herself. She disappears under the table, only her feet protruding - such hard, unlovely feet, full of cracks and ravines, like breakaways on a black-soil plain. Rubbish and Mudge are busy at the wash-tubs, laughing and chatting as they work, gossiping about the white girls and the other. 'You see Ruby when that Lissadell boy come up? My word, old Daylight wanna look out longa his gin. By-and-bye he come home find Ruby run away longa Lissadell. [28]

Certain jobs held more status and responsibility, but accompanying this were often greater limitations on personal freedom. 'Kitchen girls' helped the white, Chinese or Aboriginal cook, who was their main boss. Sometimes such workers worked in the 'kitchen' which catered for the black employees' meals only. 'Cook' and 'main cook' were positions of status. Elsey of Wittwoo and Chapman were proud of their cookery skills. [29] After all, cook was a position which a white or Chinese person usually filled. 'Housegirl' was a position of greater authority and responsibility. This woman was expected to organise the household work amongst the other Aboriginal women, and she also trained the young girls. Housegirls were reputedly loyal and dependable women, often making great sacrifices for their bosses, as exemplified by Prichard's heroine in Coonardoo, and Porteus' character, Biddy, in Cattlemen. [30] In real life housegirls took their position seriously indeed and had to behave quite differently from the other women, who were able to fool amongst themselves. 'Housegirls' were expected to display deference to their 'lady' and, in general, the women of the station Aborigines. Such women were Helen Sullivan of Tipperary, Biddy of Louisa Downs, and Madeleine Moore admitted they knew very little of their traditional culture because the greater part of
their lives was spent with white families. Moore was not even permitted to go out at night, and had to sleep in a bedroom with the manager's children. She was not allowed any socialising with Aborigines, and 'marriage' was forbidden. [31] As Beverley Kingston noted, such a situation could perpetually bind a domestic into a state of 'dependence, devotion and gratitude'. [32] Moore married when she was middle-aged, and was not able to bear children.

White domestic servants in early twentieth century Australia worked an eleven hour day, and there were often no guaranteed holidays, not even on Sundays. [33] Aboriginal women seem to have worked slightly fewer hours, and the majority still had the opportunity for leisure time in their own environment. They collected native foods during the lunch-break and on weekends, and could fit in the occasional swim or other recreation. They were able to live relatively normal family lives, at least when the men were not out at stockcamps. Their work was certainly more strenuous than the average white domestic's, owing to frontier conditions, which meant often distant water supplies, no gas or electricity, although rural living did not necessarily imply any lack of hygiene: on some stations, waitresses had to wear special serving caps and uniforms, maintain a silver service, and lacy tablecloths, and serve from fine English china. [36] A girl often had to pump furiously at a pump in the midday heat while the white family ate in the cool. Few white domestics would have had to wash and iron their dusty uniforms every lunch hour, let alone hunt or gather foodstuffs, slaughter and butcher the meat to be eaten. There were more hands on station than in the ordinary city kitchen, but there were many more mouths to feed: the manager's family, white employees and dozens of Aboriginal workers. Sometimes the work was on quite a grandiose scale for rural conditions: on Victoria River Downs in the 1920s, for example, the yard was neatly swept for 50 yards around the entire homestead; on Nutwood Downs, Aboriginal women established and maintained extensive pawpaw groves, and tropical fruit and vegetable gardens. [39]

At larger stations, some of the women's duties were more specialised: milking and cooking, for example, would be the responsibility of specific individuals. But other women were classified as 'general domestics' or 'assistants' who performed varied duties. Most Aboriginal women performed more generalised duties than the average white domestic. W.T. Pearce, a storekeeper at remote Daly Waters and husband of Henrietta, emphasised this when he explained that he had employed white labour time and again, but it was always a failure, as he could not afford to pay 'Cook, kitchen maid, waitress, yardman etc.' [36] Nancy, one of Pearce's employees, testified that she did this type of work during the day and the laundress at night. It appears that she also rendered 'sexual services' as she claims to have had a child with Bill Pearce. [37]

White employers often complained of the Aboriginal women's need for constant supervision. In 1914, Mrs Gilruth, wife of the Northern Territory Administrator, wrote in a newspaper article:

The labours can be made a good domestic and is perfectly

willing to learn, and tractable, but black women are not self-reliant. They could not be left in charge of the house or of children, but if anyone is over them they are alright. [38]

In a similar vein Ernestine Hill wrote of black domestics in 1937: 'One survey of the washing up, a little embroidery, and a bucket, and unless watched with lynx eyes, mysteriously they disappear into the garden'. [39] The amount of supervision required for domestic servants may have varied from one station to another, but there were Aboriginal women on most stations who taught and supervised the young girls. They took much responsibility, and sometimes virtually ran the household. These housegirls or head women were older, authoritative figures who had a high degree of control over their subordinates. Daisy exemplified this aspect when she testified that Flora Ningbing, who taught her cooking, was always obeyed when she gave orders. The girls and older women were 'never givin cheek, no. Now we bin longa Ningbing station me allabout girl — good, no row, only just the work. That's all we bin only do ... No fighting, nothing'. [40]

European claims of their need for white supervision were thus sharply contradicted by the presence of this internal organisation. Gunn, who portrayed her female staff as irresponsible and disorganised, mentioned her appreciation of a labours called Nellie because she 'rounded up' the other women when shirking. [41] Prichard noted that Coonardoo, the housemaid, was authoritative in the camp, yet quiet and submissive in the house. [42] Only when the white woman was not supervising would an Aboriginal woman feel comfortable to assert her powers. Possibly this is the reason some mistresses did not recognize Aboriginal head-women, whose presence enabled the staff to function effectively for periods without any white supervision. [43] Nevertheless it was very common for trusted women to take over the care of white children for whole days or longer. They took them far from the homestead on bush hunting and gathering expeditions, without any supervision by the station 'missus'. Prichard sensitively portrays the all-encompassing reliance upon her 'untiring servant':

She played with the girls as usual, took the baby away down the creek so that Nellie (the missus) might rest in the afternoon, told the children stories, mended their frocks and knickers while they hunted for bards, clibmed trees, dug for water ...

Chapman claimed that Mrs Miller would check on the things cooking in the kitchen. She would tell them what to do, but did not work with them. In the kitchen, Sheba and Winnie worked independently. As Chapman explained, the missus was 'allatime longa house. He never used to tell em us what to do, 'cause me and Sheba do it myself'. [43] When Djundin was left in charge of the Ningbing homestead, the boss gave her a key to the store, and the Aborigines were instructed to take what they needed unsupervised by whites. At Newry, Hector Fuller left the Aboriginal women in charge of the house
and did not come back, being replaced by another manager. [45] Since work went by such a set routine, it followed that once an employee had learnt the necessary skills, she would be quite capable of carrying on unsupervised. And even before workers were expert, the Aboriginal supervisors were able to take charge of the situation. There were fewer white bosses in the work associated with the house than in stockwork, where there was sometimes a white overseer, a head stockman and contractors. The manager’s wife, if there was one, and sometimes a cook were the houseworkers’ only non-Aboriginal supervisors. They were, however, in closer and more constant contact with them as their work was more localised, contributing to the strong mutual friendships and sense of loyalty between key houseworkers and the ‘missus’.

On completing the day’s work, some Aboriginal women visited the station house to engage in love-making with the manager or other white employees. This was the main cause which could destroy their relationships with white women. Bushmen often boasted that they preferred to employ females because they would ‘work all day in the saddle and all night in the swag’, but for others it was to contribute to deep psychological conflicts due to contemporary attitudes, as skillfully portrayed in Tom Ronan’s Vision Splendic and in K.S. Prichard’s Coonandoo. Bill Harry, a man who travelled around the stations in the 1930s and was later a patrol officer, described the day’s end:

A cough from the bung; a signal that the nymphs of the night – the girls from the black’s camp nearby – are here, acts as a magic spell. The sages of yore slink back into their musty covers; the bush oracles falter over their words; their minds are elsewhere. The bread is cooked, the fires die down, and Orion the mighty hunter in the heavens looks down upon the mighty hunters of the woods. [46]

In contrast to this quintessentially male perception, northern Aborigines see the constellation as depicting a woman with a dilly bag and digging stick who is gathering yams – a ‘mighty’ female hunter? [47]

BEFORE GROG

Our perception of chronology has not been taken up by many Aborigines to date: the twelve-months-equals-a-year notion continues to be irrelevant to many territory Aborigines. If an event happened fairly recently, this is sometimes described by ex-station or station Aborigines as ‘yesterday’, while years away will be described as ‘long time’ or ‘1-o-n-g time’; ‘olden days’ or ‘early days’ is often used to describe as far back as the dreamtime/creation legends. [48]

Despite the presence of the wireless on many stations, the frequent visits of motor cars for those on main routes, and the regular arrivals of planes, stations in 1938 remained sheltered from such changes by reasons of their remoteness. Everyday work routines tend to be self-perpetuating, especially when a complex web of interrelationships has grown up between masters and servants, whites and blacks.

Although most of the Aborigines interviewed worked mainly in the 1930s and later, it was almost impossible to locate the topic of ‘what life was like’ – so blurred into the general as the commonplace tends to be – into the specific year of 1938, the year on which the biocentennial historians are focusing their attention. Difficulties in assessing people’s ages and frequent lack of interest in the 1938 concept contributed to problems of chronology. Linking up routines with the time of certain bosses, and the lengthier process of attempting to assess ages helped, though this was complicated by a preference by many Aborigines for being considered older: grey hairs and even a wornout look can be advantageous because an aged appearance contributes to status.

Events obviously affected Aborigines in a variety of ways, depending on which pastoral area they lived in. In general, however, many do emphasize key time-spans. Some who identified with a particular European boss kept referring to his or her time. More commonly, they referred to ‘before the Japanese war’, ‘before wages’, and most often ‘before grog’. The second world war had an impact on Aboriginal employment, population, residence and lifestyle which caused much change and disruption. The introduction of cash wages during and after the war had some impact, though this was only marginal on an everyday basis where the only store was the station’s, which often did not deal in cash. Wages were frequently paid into trust accounts that Aborigines never saw. [49]

‘Before grog’ is the time span which is most stressed. The continuing problem of alcohol is perceived as the worst feature of recent decades, especially by women. Many of those interviewed were extremely nostalgic about station life in the days ‘before grog’, depicting this as a harmonious golden age with only minor ups and downs, as an almost unbroken continuum. [50] They conveyed a sense that this time was something of a vacuum, where they were glad to be sheltered from the many problems they now face. It was a society they knew, understood, and in which they had a defined place; it was an environment in which there were fixed parameters where they had defined their areas of control.

Dagaragu, near Wave Hill, was an exception, as more than one man I spoke with emphasised the exploitative nature of pre-wages station life. They were more nostalgic about the old ‘bush days’ of their childhood or annual walkabout where they lived off the land described as ‘long time’ or ‘1-o-n-g time’; ‘olden days’ or ‘early days’ is often used to describe as far back as the dreamtime/creation legends. [48]

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station life in the days before. And there were advantages: Aborigines were able to remain on or near their traditional lands protected from other white men, were allowed a reasonable degree of access to sacred sites, were usually secure in gaining a reliable food supply and the few commodities they desired, were normally guaranteed a camp for their old people, and horses and introduced forms of transport added to their mobility. Many important priorities were thus obtainable. Australian soldiers, trackers and Japanese and their machines and weaponry would disrupt the lives of these station Aborigines for a time. But wages and grog were to have more long lasting effects on their everyday lives.

NOTES

All interviews were conducted by the author, and copies are in the author's possession.

3 Commonwealth year book, 1938 and Annual Report of NT Administration, 1936-7, 36, for further figures.
4 Quoted in Payne-Fletcher report, 70.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid, 70-1.
7 Ibid, 71.
8 Ibid, 72.
9 Recommendations of policy in native affairs in the NT of Australia by Dr D. Thomson, Commonwealth PD, 1937, 56.
10 Copies of these magazines are available at the Mitchell Library.
13 Details of debate were published in Ibid, late 1927 and early 1928.
14 Northern Standard, 5 Aug 1938.
16 Ibid, 8 Mar 1938.
17 Ibid, 4 Mar 1938.
19 'White or Black', in Northern Standard, 4 Mar 1936. Herbert's actual words were 'Oh go to hell you bloody white bastard'; personal communication from X. Herbert.
21 Interview with W. Chapman, Kununurra, 28 July 1978.
22 Durack, Allabout, 32.
23 Interview with D. Djundun, Mirima Village, 26 July 1978.
25 E. George, Two at Daly Waters, Melbourne 1946, 28.
26 Interview with D. Djundun.
28 Durack, Allabout, 21.
29 Interview with Kaiser and Elsey, Katherine, 2 Sept 1978.
31 Interview with M. Moore, Dunham River, 27 July 1978.
32 B. Kingston, Poor Mary Ann: domestic service as a career for girls in Australia during the 19th century, Refractory Girl, 1974, 6.
33 Ibid.
34 Private photographic collections illustrate these details. See also George, Daly Waters.
36 W.T. Pearce to Administrator, 21 Mar 1940, AA Darwin, F1 item 40/476.
37 Interview with group of Aborigines at old women's home, Katherine, 30 Aug 1978; George, Daly Waters; Mrs Pearce took an unusual interest in her boy Lesley, but he was taken away by police prior to world war II, because he was part-Aboriginal. See chapter 2 of George for description of this incident and its effects on Nancy, Northern Territory Times, 30 July 1974.
39 Interview with D. Djundun.
40 A. Gunn, We of the Never Never, London, 1908, 74 and 137. Rosy the household was head of staff.
41 Prichard, Coonardoo, p. 131.
42 Contemporary whites often argued that Aborigines had no boss in their own tribes, yet would obey a white man. This was an argument used conveniently to justify their exploitation by white employers. This is a rather complex issue which I have discussed in an unpublished paper, 'Tamed blacks: paternalism and control', 1978.
43 Interview with W. Chapman. In Aboriginal English, 'he' refers to either male or female.
44 Interview with D. Djundun.; interview with Bil analysis and Ladi, Moongool Darwng, 7 Aug 1978.
45 B. Harney, North of 23 degrees, Sydney 1965, 80-1.
46 The sexual relationship of Aboriginal women with white men is another very complex topic which I discuss in a forthcoming book on prostitution edited by Kay Daniels. Their roles as stockworkers, fencers and road makers, and the variety and nature of job allocation has also been discussed in my article 'Spinifex fairies': Aboriginal workers in the N.T.', in E. Windschuttle, Women, class and history, Sydney 1980, 237-267, and in an unpublished chapter of my thesis on Aboriginal labour in
the pastoral industry 1911-1939. Much more could be written about daily routine; more scenes could be added and interpreted for their variations, nuances and significance - there are so many levels of everyday life which could be explored even with the evidence currently available. Oral history collected by Aboriginal women would enrich this immensely, and some Aboriginal women will probably be interviewing in the north for the Bicentennial Oral History Project.

Most of my experience has been with Aborigines from the northern half of the NT, especially those with cattle station backgrounds. There is undoubtedly much regional diversity in terminology and conceptualisation.

Some Barkly Tableland stations near the Queensland border such as Alexandria and Rockhampton Downs paid wages. Large companies with Queensland interests apparently found it simpler to run the stations according to Queensland practices, and local blacks probably expected cash wages since their Queensland neighbours received them.

See A. Laurie and A. McGrath, 'And I was a drover once myself', in D. Barwick, et al., Fighters and singers, forthcoming.

7 After the outward appearance:
Scientists, administrators and politicians
Andrew Markus

To the Editor of 'The Ladder,'

Morgana, August 23, 1936

Sir, - In reading the splendid series of articles which recently appeared in 'The West Australian,' I noticed one bit that made me sorry. It seemed to be thought awful for the half-castes to have to live with full bloods, and not to live with white people. Are we natives so bad as all that? Because a half-caste has a little white in his skin people seem to think that God puts him above us. I am a full-blooded woman, lawfully married to a half-caste. I had a chance of schooling and can read and write, but my half-caste husband cannot. I know his brains are equal to mine, but he did not have the same chance. I do not boast about my learning to him and he does not boast about his light colour. We are both very happy together. We live in a four-roomed cottage bought by my husband. I enjoy the comfort of a cottage as much as he does. If the Government does anything, don't you think it would be fairer if they gave equal chances to blacks and half-castes? My husband's mother and my mother were friends in the same bush camp, and on equal terms, and should I not be on equal terms with my husband? I am very thankful to white people who taught me to read the Bible in which I believe, but many white people need to read such verses as 1 Samuel 16:7. I like the verse in the second book of Corinthians, the tenth chapter and the seventh verse which says: 'Do ye look on things after the outward appearance? If any man trust in himself that he is Christ's let him of himself think this again, that, as he is Christ's even so are we Christ's.'

Yours, etc.
Mona Burton (full-blood)

(The Ladder, vol. 1, no. 2, Oct. 1936, p. 26.)